

POONA PACT

Poona Pact: replaced the separate electorate with reservations for the Depressed Classes



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The Poona Pact was a landmark agreement signed on 24 September 1932 between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to resolve the issue of separate electorates for “Depressed Classes” (now known as Scheduled Castes) in colonial India.

Background

The British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald’s Communal Award of August 1932 proposed separate electorates for Depressed Classes in central and provincial legislatures. Ambedkar supported this as a measure for greater political empowerment of Dalits, but Gandhi opposed it, believing it would fragment Hindu society and weaken the struggle for independence.

Terms and Features

- The principle of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes was abandoned. Instead, a system of joint electorates was accepted, where members of the Depressed Classes would vote as part of the general electorate.
- Reserved seats for the Depressed Classes were significantly increased from 71 seats under the Communal Award to 148 seats in provincial legislatures.
- In each constituency, the members of the Depressed Classes on the general electoral roll would form an electoral college to elect a panel of four candidates for the reserved seats. The general electorate would then choose the representative from this panel.
- 18% of the total seats in the central legislature were reserved for the Depressed Classes based on the joint electorate system.
- The Pact included provisions for adequate educational grants to be provided to Depressed Classes in every province.
- The future continuation and duration of these reservations were to be decided by mutual agreement between communities.
- The Pact aimed to ensure non-discrimination and social justice for the Depressed Classes while maintaining the political unity of the Hindu community by avoiding a split through separate electorates.

This agreement was signed between Mahatma Gandhi (representing the Hindu community) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (representing the Depressed Classes) on September 24, 1932, at Yerwada Jail in Poona.

These terms marked a compromise between the British government's Communal Award and the demands for political representation of Dalits, shaping future reservation policies in independent India.

Historical Significance

- The Pact ended Gandhi's fast unto death and united different factions within the Indian nationalist movement.
- It became the basis for future reservations in the Indian Constitution for Scheduled Castes and influenced the 1935 Government of India Act.
- It solidified Ambedkar's leadership among the oppressed classes and made their upliftment a nationwide responsibility, not limited to the Congress or Hindus alone.

Criticisms and Impact

- Many Dalit leaders, including Ambedkar, viewed the loss of separate electorates as a setback, arguing it denied them "double voting" and the independence of representation.
- Critics argue the Pact subordinated depressed classes to majority Hindu interests and made them vulnerable as a political vote bank.
- Despite reservations, the Pact accelerated the struggle against untouchability and was a precursor to the world's largest affirmative action program in independent India.

Difference of Opinions on Separate Electorates

Difference of Opinions on Separate Electorates between Gandhi and Ambedkar

The Poona Pact arose out of a significant disagreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar regarding the Communal Award of 1932, specifically the provision of separate electorates for the depressed classes (also known as Scheduled Castes or Dalits).

Ambedkar's viewpoint

- **Advocated Separate Electorates:** Ambedkar strongly supported separate electorates for the depressed classes to ensure their genuine political representation and safeguard their interests.
- **Believed Joint Electorates Inadequate:** He felt that joint electorates, even with reserved seats, would not be sufficient to challenge the subordinate position of the

depressed classes and might allow the majority to influence the election of Dalit representatives.

- **Focus on Political Empowerment:** Ambedkar believed that the depressed classes needed political power to effectively address their grievances and achieve social and economic equality, arguing that political democracy was meaningless without their equal participation.

Gandhi's viewpoint

- **Opposed Separate Electorates:** Gandhi vehemently opposed separate electorates for the depressed classes.
- **Feared Division of Hindu Society:** He believed that separate electorates would further divide Hindu society and isolate the depressed classes from the larger Hindu community, hindering efforts to abolish untouchability and threatening national unity.
- **Saw it as a British Strategy:** Gandhi viewed the Communal Award as a British attempt to perpetuate their "divide and rule" policy and weaken the independence movement.
- **Emphasized Moral and Social Reform:** Gandhi believed that the issue of untouchability was primarily a moral and social problem within Hinduism and should be addressed through social reforms and a change of hearts within the Hindu community, rather than solely through political means like separate electorates.

The Compromise - Poona Pact

Gandhi's unwavering opposition, including a fast unto death, pressured Ambedkar to reconsider. The Poona Pact, signed on September 24, 1932, was a compromise that addressed the needs of the depressed classes while preserving Hindu unity.

- **Joint Electorates with Reserved Seats:** The pact replaced separate electorates with a system of reserved seats for the depressed classes within the general electorate.
- **Increased Representation:** The number of reserved seats for the depressed classes in provincial legislatures was significantly increased from 71 to 148.
- **Fair Representation in Public Services and Education:** The pact also aimed to ensure fair representation of the depressed classes in public services and allocated educational grants for their upliftment.

In essence, the Poona Pact represented a clash between two fundamentally different approaches to achieving social justice for the depressed classes: Ambedkar's focus on political power through separate electorates and Gandhi's emphasis on unity and social reform through joint electorates with reserved seats. While the Poona Pact provided a solution to the immediate political crisis, Ambedkar remained critical of its outcomes and the broader effectiveness of joint electorates in truly empowering the Dalit community.

Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha and Mahad Satyagraha

The Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha was an organization founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1924 to improve the social and political conditions of the marginalized communities in India. The Mahad Satyagraha was a landmark civil rights protest led by Ambedkar in 1927, with the crucial support of the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha.

Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha

Formation

- **Establishment:** Founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on July 20, 1924, in Bombay (now Mumbai), the name translates to "Outcastes Welfare Association".
- **Mission:** Its core purpose was to address the educational, socio-political, and economic challenges faced by the "untouchables," or Dalits.
- **Motto:** The Sabha's guiding principles were "Educate, Organize, and Agitate," reflecting its multi-pronged strategy for empowerment.

Key activities

- **Educational initiatives:** The Sabha started schools to promote education among the depressed classes, viewing it as a vital tool for self-confidence and progress.
- **Advocacy and representation:** It worked to bring the grievances of the untouchables to the attention of the government and other authorities.
- **Social reform:** Beyond education, the organization aimed for the overall social and economic betterment of its community.

Mahad Satyagraha

Background

In the early 1920s, despite official resolutions by the Bombay Council allowing all citizens access to public places, many local boards and departments continued to bar Dalits from public facilities like water tanks.

In 1924, the Mahad municipality passed a resolution to allow untouchables to use the Chavdar Tank, a public water source. However, the resolution was never enforced.

The protest (1927)

- **Event:** To enforce the rights that were legally theirs, Dr. Ambedkar organized a conference in Mahad for thousands of Dalits. On March 20, 1927, he led approximately 2,500 people to the Chavdar Tank.
- **Act of defiance:** In a symbolic and rebellious act, Ambedkar and his followers drank water from the tank, challenging centuries of caste-based discrimination.
- **Aftermath:** The protest triggered outrage among orthodox caste Hindus, who later "purified" the tank with cow urine and cow dung.

Significance

- **Foundational event:** The Mahad Satyagraha is considered a pivotal moment and "foundational event" for the Dalit movement in India. It was the first instance where Dalits collectively and forcefully asserted their human rights.
- **Ambedkar's leadership:** The event solidified Ambedkar's position as the foremost leader of the downtrodden, providing a blueprint for organizing future movements against the caste system.
- **Symbolism over water:** While the protest was for the right to drink water, Ambedkar emphasized that the true objective was to "establish the right to drink water" and challenge the unequal, caste-based social order.
- **Legacy:** March 20th is now observed as Social Empowerment Day in India to commemorate the Satyagraha.